

# Realism In Contemporary Fine Art

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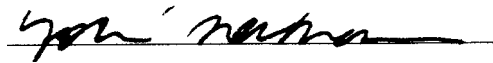
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I reached a moment with the painting of the "demoiselles", where although I could stare at the painting itself for hours and go over the smaller compositions, such as the table up front, or the drapery at the top, or indeed any of the models, and start to see what needed adjusting and how. It was entirely a different matter to get the brush over to the canvas. It was getting harder and harder as I very slowly became more discouraged, more frazzled, more obsessed, and less able to focus on the actual work. As time brought me ever closer to looming deadlines, I began to try and use my creativity to jerry rig quick solutions. A desperate attempt to change the nature of the work in hopes of finishing it- albeit in a drastically compromised way. Every week there was a new battle strategy, a new effort saving technique that would close the distance of what seemed to be the last 20% of the work. But every closing campaign simply left a mess of bigger problems in its wake, as though running a marathon, the finish line keeps moving. I proverbially ran and ran until spent, left staring across my studio at a lost battle, I finally realized I had to let go of not only the hopes and ambitions tied up with this project, but of even finishing the canvas.

It is my understanding that every artist has at least once come up against a piece that refuses to play along. That resists any attempts to be finished, as though it's life cycle ends with completion, and so it refuses to be done, willing the paint to stay wet by confounding the artist. This is maybe the most discouraging experience for a painter, it is for me anyway. We have different notions me and this creature. I try to create it, try to convince it that being finished is a great thing, it belongs out in the world, which is a big and great place where many people will come to visit and look at it, in turn allowing me to make a great many friends for which it can be displayed. In its ignorance it refuses and will not leave the studio, having its relative unfinished state to bargain with for this end.

So, In the most superficial way, I would stamp this endeavour with what the internet generation has dubbed an "epic fail". But in the same breath, there was much learned. What follows is partially an autopsy report for a dead project and partially an attempt to gain something of concrete value out of what has been an essentially frustrating experience. Like the inventor of sticky notes, who set out to create the strongest glue possible, and instead found himself wondering what he could possibly use this horribly weak adhesive for, there is something of value to be found here. I just have to go diving through the rubble to find it. Part 1 deals with my project, and my own reflections of the process. Part 2 outlines several theoretical and historical issues that I had been researching which lead

me to attempt the project to begin with.

I hope it proves to be an informative read.

## PART 1

### PROJECT SUMMARY

Usually I start out with a technical concept. I try to get as detailed as possible in regards to the logistics of how I'll carry out the work. The ideas themselves are quite intricate and so an intuitive approach to process isn't appropriate. Instead lots of research and a mapped out plan of action are required.

I don't no longer think of art as an explorative process, except in the most general way. My approach is very exploitive. Most people think of artists as engaging in an activity that is essentially explorative, an open ended thing, the inquisitive mind journeying along uncharted creative waters. I believe this is a very narrow understanding of the process. There needs to be a managing consciousness that marshals resources and knowledge towards a desired end. The whole act of creation is a dance with chaos; where do the ideas come from in the first place? How are experience, knowledge, and history thrown together? How is the vaguest impression transformed into an actual real thing that everyone understands? How does the mind thread it's way

through various influences to arrive at unique conclusions? The source itself is unquantifiable; so why not rationalize as much of the process as you can? (One can never fully control it, but in trying to, one can at least come to understand it.)

Of course it never does go as planned. In less than perfect attempts, one reaches a point where a decision needs to be made as to whether one should resolve a piece of art or continue trying to actualize what it was supposed to be. This was the point I reached with the Demoiselles des Avignon project on October 1 2009. I lacked the experience necessary to carry out the ambitious scheme as originally laid out, but at one point I did have an interesting and potentially successful painting.

Integrity dictates that the artist sacrifice everything in pursuit of artistic truth. In this frame of reference there is no compromise, the vision must be realized (this presumes that the artist fully understands the vision at the outset, which I'm not at all sure is most often the case). However on the ground, an artist is essentially a project manager, unlike anyone running anything, they must constantly evaluate risk versus reward. At what point do I throw the map out the window and look around? This moment hit me on October 1st, with a little over a month left and a lifetime's worth of work still to complete. The practical voice of compromise took over. I re-evaluated what I had achieved. Understanding that I could not complete this

painting anytime soon I decided to scrap the methodology that I had employed over the Spring and Summer. The plan had been to produce three paintings of the same subject matter. Here's how they would have theoretically related to each other:

(one) The Rubensian, baroque method would have relied largely on drawing skill, and manipulated layers of opaque/transparent paint layers to achieve a luminous sense of plasticity.

(two) The modern realist painting was to rely largely on accurate colour relationships to do the heavy lifting with the drawing aspects were to be simplified to generalized shapes.

(three) The third painting was going to be guided by an expressionist sensibility. It was not to rely on a particular method, but rather explore some interesting themes from the other two paintings to build up an interesting surface, one that did not rely so strictly on observation.

This exercise was meant to explore the intricate relationship between aesthetic approach and subject matter, and this is where a piece succeeds or fails. It's where all the associative commentary happens- an extremely subtle, and tricky dialogue to truly understand. This cannot be so quickly mastered, through such diagrammatic means (...by me...at this juncture in time).

Sitting in front of me on October 1st, was a painting that resembled none of the 3 hypothetical



scenarios described above. I had started one way and then lost focus, and began to rely on instincts where I couldn't solve technical problems. Thus, the work lacked the conviction of the "vision" it was meant to express. At this point I was trying to finish one painting within the remaining month. Seeing as the piece was already compromised, I then tried to hack through the remaining 20% of the painting. every desperate attempt seemed to bring me further and further away from the finish line<sup>1</sup>. At that point, I was looking at a piece that was utterly confused, and ought to be abandoned. This essay is an exploration of those issues, which I failed to do through painting.

#### AESTHETICS

I'll discuss aesthetics in general a bit later, but most useful for now, I'd like to explain my own aesthetic sensibility, which lead to my current attempts.

It is fair to say that Contemporary culture in the Fine Arts no longer has one accepted philosophy, and no over ruling manifesto to dictate the proper tenets of good taste to the public.<sup>[1]</sup> It is not a realistic scenario to propose one truth thing in a world so well networked, where technology makes available all cultures to anyone with a computer and wifi connection. The

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<sup>1</sup>The Compact Oxford English Dictionary. the compact oxford English Dictionary, 25 Feb. 2003. Web. 25 Mar. 2003 <[http://www.askoxford.com/concise\\_oed/postmodernism?view=uk](http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/postmodernism?view=uk)>.

superiority of one style over another cannot be asserted in an atmosphere of plurality, where for several generations there hasn't been one oppressive aesthetic that acts as a catalyst for alternatives. This is truest in the contemporary culture of Fine Art. The current establishment, itself the result of the avante garde usurping the old order early in the 20th century, learned to avoid absolutes, thus protecting their establishment from the same kind of coup imposed on the old establishment . Everything new is to be welcomed, lest it one day grows into a counterculture threat.

This pluralist phenomenon is a very interesting creature. While it imposes a much needed humility over the discourse in art criticism, and allows a sense of potential for artists, who now have immense exposure to art in all it's permutations, it also leaves a frightening ambiguity, a relativism so pervasive, that sometimes modern art resembles a semantic game that everyone is too caught up in to identify work with conclusive certainty. A side effect of this atmosphere is that today artists have to make the most basic decisions about their art. Before, dogma, chance, and locality set one up to work in a particular fashion, for example, apprenticeships, or the first academies . A well informed artist makes life difficult in the sense that suddenly there are several ways of executing something, and it's pretty easy to find information about any of those techniques, but very troublesome to learn and incorporate them.

It should be noted at this point that no accredited art colleges would be caught dead teaching under a unified aesthetic philosophy, or one particular set of

skills anymore, as they once used to. To work out the mundane specifics of craft is sadly not part of the formal training for aspiring artists (for my purposes, the word artist refers to the practices of painting, drawing, sculpture, and printmaking). With class structures teaching anywhere up to 5 possibly unrelated topics per term, I'm not convinced that this grocery store approach to art education serves anyone particularly well<sup>[2]</sup> On a psychological level I'm not convinced that more choices equal better decisions. On a practical level, any one set of techniques taught at the colleges, take several years of concerted effort to even begin to understand properly. As a result lot of confusion ensues. At the end of the day, as artists we're left to try and find our way into the slipstream of an art practice we may only have been introduced to from a Birdseye view, but are expected to execute from the trenches. It is no gentle descent, I assure you.

My ambition, was and remains to create art which speaks to the space within which the artistic phenomena takes place. Since we're speaking of aesthetics, I'm proposing a McLuhanist definition of what work is about. Simply put, the way in which the thing is done speaks much more fundamentally to its meaning than the symbolism depicted by the subject matter. I had this one clear understanding of my work: The way in which it was to be carried out should reflect the pluralism of the culture. Of course it was not so academic, more of an instinct to put different aesthetic worlds in collision

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<sup>2</sup> Kissick, John *Elephants in the Room: the education of the artist in today's universities*. An essay. Canadian Art Magazine, Winter 2009. pg. 70

with each other. Actually I've been speaking about this as though it was some deliberate decision, when in truth I simply couldn't choose to invest time into one practice, when there were so many other ones that I appreciated equally. This is not exactly a new idea. It is more commonly referred to as collage.

This had been done in a superficial way by pop artists of the 60s: Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns most prominently, sampled imagery from anywhere and everywhere else and incorporated it into their work. Still the cubists and Dadaists accomplished it earlier at the dawn of the 20th century<sup>[pics-1]</sup>. I'm aware how contentious it is to call the Dadaists and the pop artists superficial all at once, however I'm referring specifically to their use of collage as superficial in that it primarily related to aesthetic value. Rarely did they care about the symbolic or notional significance of the sampled imagery. In the 90s I was already working in this vein while simultaneously, hip hop and electronic music were beginning to prioritize found sound over live instrumentation. Chip Kidd's book jacket designs were beginning to set a new standard in publishing for very clean, selective image sourcing. It was mainstream. There's nothing new to collage aesthetics. I became dissatisfied with the light treatment of the sampled material. Or maybe I simply grew too fascinated with it. At it's most basic level, It was meant as a sort of modern joke, wasn't it? to photocopy a famous painting-a tongue in cheek homage. Pointed and profitable to a certain generation. As the joke got stale people started using collage as simply another graphic tool.

Personally, I came to the conclusion that there was a heavy handedness to traditional collage. That it was impossible to truly make the work your own without totally destroying the subtleties or relationships of the original. I respected the internal "rules" of the sampled work.

Maybe the quality of the sourced work made me feel as though my understanding of fine art was greatly impoverished. This has been known to happen to modern artists who look back a few centuries at the art of the past with anything other than disdain. Collage can be used as a homage to the original, but is just as often a snub. It's an implied insult to craftsmanship for the contemporary hack to literally chop up and recycle work of the past in service of the new thing. One needs a pretty unshakeable faith in the preferability of the end result, unless one is simply co-opting the image in service of the selling of a product, so as to lend it some gravitas.

Working with this problem I came to the realization that the only way to properly control the visual environment while "sampling" would be to generate the source material, Tooling the collage proccess.<sup>[3]</sup> This would be a far deeper exploration into visual culture than simply grabbing the imagery from elsewhere. To figure out how a Rembrandt was painted, for examples, is an investment of several years. To photocopy it is a matter of several seconds, and yet I couldn't bring myself to appropriate

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<sup>3</sup> "tooling" in architecture, design, and engineering circles, refers to fabricating your own tools to customize the process and better control the finished product

an aesthetic without learning the technique first. Maybe some moral rule was at play here, as in "you have to learn the rules before you can break them" This multifaceted pastiche seemed to me the most utterly difficult plan for how to proceed in my artistic endeavors. It would require the artist to set up artificial boundaries between techniques instead of the natural process of incorporating them into the whole-a sort of artificial partitioning one's self into several artists. On the other hand, it's the only philosophy that holds true to my sensibility, which is inclusive, fractured and incoherent. Unable to value one aesthetic system over another, I liken it to 3 people talking over each other. Could this be the price of a truly open appreciation of visual culture? Yet in this quagmire there is a truth. When 3 people talk over each other, one becomes less aware of what people are saying and more aware of the situation in which they are saying it. If I could bring that space to the fore of consciousness, I could find a balance between the fractured sprawl of the content and the minimalist presence of the space itself, then I would consider my work truly successful.

There are several factors at play here. The first is that many of the random factors that keep artists work consistent don't apply to me. My approach to working is more athletic or scientific than expressive or spontaneous. When I fail to execute a painting well, I am drawn into it further, throwing myself at the problem until I've figured out how to do it. There's research involved, controlled testing, experiments and

such. This approach has left me with a sound understanding of many different styles and disciplines, none of which feel singularly true or intuitive.

Another factor is the inability to see art chronologically. A 15th century woodcut is just as vital as a contemporary painting. A well drawn comic book has no less cultural significance than a renaissance oil painting. Pop art, Industrial design, animated cartoons, washroom graffiti, Old Master paintings-all are valuable, all are valid. Perhaps because I am a connector by nature, I do not respect the boundaries between these things, they are all somehow different iterations of some hidden fundamental principle. So to proceed when following one thread means rejecting the others. I felt that instead I'd have to work out a scenario that lent equal speaking time to all of these voices, it was the only way for me to be true to my understanding of visual culture.

This meant rejecting the polish of a homogenized aesthetic. A Minimalist sensibility will boil things down to their essentials and look for harmony with as few elements as possible. Look at a Keith Haring painting from the 1980s, or Mies van der Rohe Skyscrapers, or an ipod, or Ernie Bushmiller's "Nancy" comic strip, you will see minimalist tendencies at their purest. [\[pics-2\]](#) Let's extend this to include things that aren't minimalist at all, but rather elegant. Elegance runs on the same principles as minimalism (actually a minimalist would likely define minimalism as the aesthetic embodiment of elegance). The work of Marcel Dzama, Anime classic "Ghost in the Shell", Jack Kirby's

Marvel comics from the 60s, Rubens "3 graces" painting <sup>[pics-3]</sup>, these examples all share one thing in common, they all reflect an aesthetic that is so completely it's own, that there's no trace of other influences within it. It forms a cohesive whole. This seems to be the hallmark of masters of their craft, an ability to use only what's necessary for a particular expression and strip away anything superfluous. On the opposite end you have what has been dubbed by some as "Maximalism"-the "less is a bore" response to the Van der Rohe's famous utterance, (which has become the cliché minimalist rallying chant). While always fascinating, and occasionally brilliant, this work is not, and cannot by definition be elegant. Maximalism has an irreverent candy store effect, which relies on novelty and brashness to communicate.

The question for me is how to make elegant work, where every element introduces it's own visual language. Going back to the 3 people talking analogy, It's really more like trying to orchestrate a conversation between 3 people that speak 3 different languages.

My thesis project attempted to begin to explore these Ideas by painting the same theme in several different visual languages. As it turned out, I could not paint but one.

#### A DIFFICULT PROPOSITION

When the going gets rough in the studio I can't help but feel a handicap as a painter, as though it's sheer



insanity to take up such a difficult and ambiguous proposition. Painting is anachronistic at the best of times and I suppose the main reason I stuck with it is because of the autotelic nature of the experience (I hazard a guess that those who are best in their fields, if you were to examine their motivations, you would find that love of the experience is the primary motivator for their given activity. As opposed to ethical or material concerns<sup>[4]</sup>)

Let's face it, Painting is crazy. As a serious pursuit, it is very demanding and offers little in the way of external reward. Add to this, the particular qualifier of being a realist painter and the whole proposition is catapulted off the known charts of crazy, into the hinterlands of "what, are you stupid?"

First, consider the unavoidable time investment, Realism is by far a more laborious process than any other kind of painting. This translates into more hours for less work produced. The nature of the work is far more exacting than non-observational or expressive styles. The level of precision involved robs most spontaneity from the process, so there goes the instant feedback that makes art so much fun on a visceral level. Then, at the career end of it, there's no social or professional benefit to be gleaned from the above mentioned difficulties. Actually working in this way introduces the very real possibility of critical

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<sup>4</sup> Actually this is less than shear conjecture, it's a theory covered fairly exhaustively by Russian American psychology researcher Mihly Csikszentmihalyi in the best selling book "Flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Flow*. New York: HarperCollins, 1990. Print.)

dismissal due to it's lack of contemporary cultural cache. For aspiring artists the equation is simple; more effort for less recognition or less effort for more work and more peer acceptance? Seems straight forward doesn't it? Should one feel the pull as I have to learn the old ways of painting? There's a serious handicap in the lack of expertise in the techniques necessary to do so and a deficit of appropriately trained teachers. Taking that into account, consider the social implications of being a painter. As a solo pursuit with no performative aspect, graphic expression is perhaps the least direct way of participating in the culture.

These are not the only doubts that nag at me. Painting is something I've done since I was young. I've had time to investigate it's overall state of affairs, and I keep reaching the same rather disheartening conclusion. There's not a more confused, or on the whole beleaguered medium in all the arts, nor one that is more misunderstood by it's own champions and practitioners. With this in mind, I proceed with a feeling of doing so with no real community for support, no kindred spirits, no cultural scene to partake in. When the work goes well, one hardly cares about these external factors, the autotelic experience does not leave any spare energy for worry. But when great challenges or dead ends are met, such comforts are missed.

Is this an accurate assessment of the practice? or does it say more about my character?

Dunno. You tell me.

## PART2

### NARRATIVE

"the one thing I've learned over this project specifically" said a film producer friend of mine, having recently finished a film, " is that interesting techniques are not enough to carry a project. You have to know what story you want to tell. Narrative comes first."

This might seem obvious to the point of redundancy for those who aren't themselves working in a creative discipline. But it's important to realize that technique is how the final construct is made. The effect, the illusion of a work (no matter what the medium) is for the audiences, not the creators. The ideas delivered by the final work rely on well executed technique, and these technical processes are the minute to minute truth of the artist. Much of it is clumsy trial and error and hard learned experience. The Grand Scheme, the great idea, can only guide the work, it is not itself the work.

Consequently, an artist finds herself as often as not more detached from the bigger picture than anyone

else. Also worth noting, is that artists consume the works of their disciplines in a different way than the rest of us. They are watching for causes and effects, techniques, clues as to how the final thing came together, how the illusion was achieved. So it is way too easy, indeed very common, for craft-conscious artists to get wrapped up in technique-thinking. I think this has partially to do with the concrete nature of technique. There's immediate feedback with the technical process, easily quantifiable goals, and ways of measuring success. On the creative side of things, you're back in the terrifying labyrinth of creative process, whose very nature is unstable, slippery, and far too complex to work out rationally. I have been guilty before of taking refuge in technical thought, in order to avoid the great big "why" and "to what end?" that can cut down even the most excited and inspired of us at times.

So the simple statement "story first" struck a chord. It seemed true enough on a basic level. My strongest film projects always managed to rally around the needs of the story. But how did this apply to my current art practice? In other words, what's the painting equivalent of "story first"?

These days most painters seem to be trading in techniques as tricks, (or actually lack of them as is sadly often the case). Under great pressures of a culture whose creed values originality foremost, we look for things that will make us stand out from the rest. Those trying to tell stories would much rather go into

animation, film, or the gaming industry, practical narrative mediums. So is there a fine art equivalent to such a rule?

As all things in Fine Art go, it's complicated. The question brings up the basic utility of contemporary art. Fine art tries to deal in concepts or experiences these days. It is no longer a practical proposition to illustrate through painting, ( lest the work is deemed "illustration", a derogatory term in the Fine Arts context, to refer to work that is overly literal or lacking in subtlety) Judgment aside, there is truth in the sentiment that illustrators don't deal in the types of ambiguities that fine artists do. Their communication is much more direct, and the message more precisely calculated. In Classical times it was pretty straight forward. Fine art served many roles: illustrative, spiritual, decorative, journalistic, and promotional. They all fell under the provenance of only a few mediums. As cycles of innovation sped up over time, new technologies developed more efficient ways of serving these functions. Thus, the old mediums lost ground on most of their practical applications.

I was piecing together these things, to try and orient my own practice, diagnose it by finding out where I lay within my map of the known territories of Fine Art. On the one hand, there exists a utility in film, photography, comics, and illustration that painting quite proudly rejects. True these are all art forms, and must all deal foremost with vision and aesthetic, but modern television, for example, would never tolerate the

types of subjective ambiguities that have become the standard for painting. It seems that the more recent/popular the medium, the more straightforward it's function in the eyes of it's audience. This weaves in with issues of mainstream versus alternative culture, the one being more straightforward and market driven, the other emphasizing integrity or experimentation. Indeed, rejecting the implied values of the construct that is an "industry". Fine art culture is in a strange position in that it no longer has a clearly defined mainstream polarity. Its practice isn't particularly steered by practical concerns, and so is governed disproportionately by the dictates of those who control its largest outlets. The consumer base has relatively little sway in the matter, and this is highly unusual for any "industry".

But the best art before the 20th century often quite openly served a practical function. cite-pic Jaques Louis David and Rubens painted political propaganda, Callot made birdseye view etchings of battles as a sort of map style recording of the events of the day. Delacroix and Goya made work that was essentially journalistic in nature, and served as a sort of visual op ed<sup>[pics4]</sup>. The vast majority of Italian art in the renaissance illustrated served a double function of illustrating Church lore, as well as glorifying and promoting the organization in the eyes of the people. Portraiture had its obvious functions of glorifying the clients, and keeping their likenesses around for future generations to refer to, lest they be forgotten. The business was driven by the needs of patrons and clients.

Yet under these political and economic limitations much of the western traditions most glorious work was made. In fact, the further back you go, the less allowances for artistic fancy, and the greater the practical impositions of the clients.

There are still today fine artists that deal directly with narrative elements (Marcel Dzama comes to mind). Even so, because of Art's peculiar distinction from Illustration the narratives are rarely explicit or linear, only suggested at, it is the hallmark of contemporary art to leave the situation up to the viewer to find their way through. This is partly because of the formats. The traditional mediums lack the time element necessary to deliver anything other than arrested moments within a narrative thread. The narrative craft deals exclusively with the following: How do you pack one moment of a story with the necessary information and drama to imply the whole narrative? There's an interesting lineage here that runs from the classic oil painting tradition straight through modern photography.

Classical examples have an example in this regard in that the great majority of works had as their subject matter religious themes-a narrative known to everyone. Like the conventions of Jazz, an artist's worth was gauged on interpretation of a standard set of themes more so than on the composition of original themes. This allowed for artist's work to function as running commentary on spiritual matters as well.

Explicit Narrative is by no means a necessity of effective Art any more, and I think you'd be hard

pressed to find anyone who truly thinks so. In fact tethering a specific narrative to a piece of art can block a certain desired sense of universality that is often a sought after quality in contemporary work. Betty Goodwin's "swimmer" series is a fine example of this quality<sup>[pics5]</sup>. The figures are rendered in a delicate though crude manner, recalling of the cave paintings at Lascaux. The figures have no identifying features and little detail at all, and the background is hardly more than an abstract field of negative space. This work is so evocative specifically because of its vagueness, it deals directly with sensation, unhampered by the demands of an external story, and so it is very intimate. Carla Klein achieves this same effect by painting barren and desolate landscapes that completely lack in distinctive signifiers. The effect balances the pictures perfectly between cool abstract compositions, and dimensional spaces describing bleak landscapes. One has an immediate emotional response, there are no figures or objects within the picture plain to interrupt this.

This issue is one differentiating factor between Fine Art and Graphic Art(Illustration). Where the former refuses to dictate a specific reading to the viewer and essentially trades in suggestions, the latter gauges it's success on whether it has clearly delivered its intended message. It is my belief that elements of both attitudes are necessary for a picture to resonate with the viewer. If works of Fine Art are too vague in their associations, the reader is left unsure of what to look for and may lose interest. Whereas if a graphic work is too pointed, or if it fails to evoke deeper emotional



associations, the reader is easily put off.

#### KINETIC EXPERIENCE

I've treated Fine art as a medium for communication by gauging it against other mediums such as photography, film, print mediums, and so on. Under this light it is impractical. Luckily, there's more to the issue than any proposed scale of communicative efficiency could show. The reason people continue to draw and make fine art is buried much deeper in the human experience. As it turns out, there's a need in humans, from a very young age to make marks, as Tania Kovats reports, in the introduction to "The Drawing book: a survey of drawing, the primitive means of expression"<sup>[5]</sup>

"The compulsion to make a mark, where one can exercise some sort of visual control over it occurs at the age of 18 months. By 24 months the eye is guiding the hand." Notice the lag there. Kids move the crayons around at first, hand eye co-ordination isn't a factor typically for another six months. This leads to an interesting observation

"the earliest drawings are not guided by a visual exploration of space but by an exploration of movement. At its origin, graphic expression is blind" Movement then, is the underpinning of Drawing. Movement can only exist in time, whilst a drawing can only exist outside of it.

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<sup>5</sup> Kovats, Tania, ed. *the Drawing Book: a survey of drawing, the primary means of expression*. London: Black Dog Publishing, 2005. Print. P.19

Every drawing leaves evidence of the process by which it was realized. There's an interesting parallel with music here, because music exists only as a temporal phenomena, leaving evidence of it's process (i.e. the mathematic relationship between notes, melodic structures, etc.) outside of time. Whilst there is a sense of timelessness in the very act of looking at a drawing, the eye is tracing back the movement of the drawing point, finding clues about the speed of the marks, the pressure, the rhythm. This is part of the hypnotic effect of great works of art. <sup>[6]</sup>

The Rawson/Berenson view on meaning in art states that "iconography of a work of art, its true topic, in fact, does not lie in its "subject". It lies far more deeply in how the subject is developed."<sup>[7]</sup> A whole other dimension for reading and understanding graphic expression is revealed through awareness of its structure. Any image resists the pressure to convey it's full impact at first glance, and because of the fundamentally kinetic nature of drawing, the eye tries to follow the traces of the drawing point. So when we compare realistic works of fine art with photography we must also factor in the different ways that these two picture plane based mediums are read. If we try to look for the same mark making history in a photograph we get the same results as we would had we been staring at a wall. Because for all its accuracy, a photograph can at best introduce us to the photographer as a commentator.

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<sup>6 7</sup>, Rawson, Philip. *Drawing: Second Edition*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1969. Print. Chapter 1 the theoretical base

With a drawing, there exists the intimacy of a conversation, Both the artist and the viewer occupy the same space as the picture.

"It is here, where photography fails. It can at best only give mechanical accuracy, whereas art gives the impression of a live, individual consciousness." <sup>[8]</sup>

## TECHNIQUE

When we remark on a work of art to say it has been well executed, or remark that a particular artist has good technique, what exactly are we talking about?

There is a notion of technique as an easily identifiable set of abilities. Something so apparent that it needs no further definition in common discourse. This concept is not particularly useful even at the practical level of teaching skills to novices, and doesn't hold up under close inspection. While there are times when it's quite obvious that a work has been rather impressively or rather poorly rendered, and while at such times the term "technique" is quite self evident, it is still the case that in contemporary art it's an extremely hard thing to define, (owing to the plurality of art making modes) and is often irrelevant.

There is a tendency to define Technique as a skill set relating to a collection of visual effects that the

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<sup>8</sup> Speed, Harold. *The practice and science of Drawing*, New York: Dover P, 1973 print p.72

practitioner collects like power tools and deploys at will. In critiques and art classes we often speak of brush strokes as "signatures" and "mark making vocabulary", which presumes just that. While it is not wrong exactly (artists necessarily lean towards habitual "moves", a collection of which constitutes personal "style" ) it is an incomplete analysis. A better way to think of technique relates neither to the uniqueness of an individual's "style", nor to a prodigious collection of technical skills, but rather relates to an idea that has not been compromised on it's way towards actualization. This is a position which implies humility, service towards something outside one's self, as well as a moral stance because integrity is needed to serve the thing in the face of outside pressures. In short, it's craftsmanship. The interest in craftsmanship declined with the rise of conceptualism in the Fine Arts, and has only recently made it's way back into the dialogue.

"This interest in craftsmanship seems to have a moral and ethical dimension and could be perceived as a reaction against modernist and post modernist attempts to undermine these aspects of art making. It is now possible to adopt a personal stance, as this is not perceived to be mutually exclusive with a conceptual approach."<sup>[9]</sup>

Personally, I think craft is the lifeblood of the Arts. This does not seem to be a contentious assertion

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<sup>9</sup> Kovats, Tania, ed. *the Drawing Book: a survey of drawing, the primary means of expression*. London: Black Dog Publishing, 2005. Print. p.11

anywhere other than in Fine Art, but then, in Fine art, craftsmanship is uncommonly difficult to define.

As soon as the values or conceptual goals of art begin to change, any notion of technique begins to morph as well. One unfamiliar with contemporary art would look at the genre of outsider art and dismiss it as badly done, amateurish, chicken scratching. Contemporary viewers might look at the work from a perspective where pure expressive power is of foremost value. From this perspective outsider art reflects a raw truth that the educated hand has, through careful diligence and practice, trained out of itself. Suddenly the crayon drawings on ledger paper from children, fishermen, or the mentally handicapped have the same merit as old master canvases adorning the walls of the Hermitage<sup>[pics-6]</sup>. This in itself is quite fascinating a subject to explore visual culture through, but is quite the confusing bog for the working artist. There exists a conflict between exploratory process and exploitive process, both essential to the working artist.

Artists run into all sorts of trouble trying to work our way through established techniques, other artists styles, synthesizing disparate influences and looking for something uniquely our own at the same time. But we all have to start somewhere, by role modeling we copy the moves of artists we love. Using a language cobbled from precedents, we eventually branch out and adapt what we do to express ideas and sensibilities that are uniquely ours. This can be done either in a self conscious way, where, as is often the case, young

artists are simply trying to distinguish themselves by changing their visual approach, or it can be done in a natural way, where over the course of time one's process evolves to better reflect their particular sensibility. In the end, the truest structural system of mark making will be inextricably linked to it's content (more on that later). Either way, we poor creatures, must begin with skill sets that are standardized, and poorly understood (even by those teaching them). We must pick and choose in a sea of contradicting voices as to which skills we elaborate upon and develop further, and which we ignore.

Take as an example the discipline of figure drawing. This is something that is often spoken of as a unified field of study in art. However, even just a cursory glance in a gallery reveals that there are as many different approaches to figure drawing as there are applications. cite-pic There are observational approaches, which use visual gauging (sight-size method for example) to measure the figure as it is seen, (most useful to the traditional painter), there are structural approaches which build the figure out of robot like armatures (useful mostly to animators), there are speed based gestural approaches, called "croquis" drawings (lending themselves to the kinds of calligraphic expressions seen in comics and illustration), there are anatomical approaches, tonal approaches, linear ones... you get the picture. Each approach has it's own understanding, not just of the human body, but of the discipline of drawing as a whole. Each approach carries it's own set of directions as to how the task of drawing

the human figure is to be executed. and while there is some overlap, the skill sets are not necessarily transferable. An atelier trained artist will spend up to 30 hours rendering tonally the topography of a figure to an exact likeness of the model, but remove the figure from the artist's sightline and he/she is helpless. A comic inker, by contrast, Will not only be finished within 20 minutes, but as likely as not, will have drawn the figure without the benefit of a model. However the same artist because of their typecast structural approach, may have trouble with the accurate likeness of a specific model. Then again, one could simply doodle a stick man and call it a day.

#### **b**TUNNEL VISION

The reason for artists to choose one approach over another is probably far more instinctive than historians give credit for, at least in the fundamental stages of development, (consider that the impulses driving artistic expression are vague shadows at best) Ultimately, after the long struggle to master a number of given approaches, an artist must deal in the end with art itself, with the language of visual communication. It is a reality one must face that the techniques and approaches employed in the making of art, are of little consequence once the work has left the studio. Techniques only matters in so far as they have built a convincing image, no one with the exception of other artists are particularly cognizant of the process by which the piece was made. It is usually enough to marvel

at the work, and leave the messy details of the studio where they belong.

Actually, knowing all about technique ruins the precious mystique associated with great works of art; as though such elevated sublime treasures could not possibly come from such ordinary, sloppy places as studios. This is difficult because artists spend most of their time in the problem solving/ technical zone, with a purpose to transcend it totally. Now, if the technical process is not enjoyed, then the artist will not have sufficient incentive to continue in the endeavor. However where the process becomes self serving, the artist runs a danger of losing the greater perspective necessary to communicate with the general viewer. The artist must, therefore, partition him or herself into the planning self, the doing self, and the watching self. Each self is motivated by a different purpose and without a total balance of perspectives the endeavor fails (Imagine a brigadier general that is also a foot soldier, and also a civilian.) There is an end goal where technique is irrelevant (or seems to be, actually it is simply invisible,) there is only the art, and the effect it has on the viewer. The artist can only catch this last truth in glimpses, and is by way of toil and work excluded from the powerful, reverent experience of the connoisseur, for whom the work can remain elevated and untouched by everyday realities. The great expense of being an artist, is perhaps a sort of loss of innocence. One can no longer look at the Sistine chapel with total reverie, without some small intuition of the back aches and paint drips on the face, twisted shoulder muscles and general unpleasantness that must have been



involved in painting against the general flow of gravity.

#### <sup>c</sup>TRANSCENDING TECHNIQUE

The moment the process crosses the boundary from technical problem solving into the harmonious realm of Art, one notices that the specific techniques employed are perfectly congruent with the subject matter of the work and do not fight with or overwhelm it. If we narrow the scope to look at drawing and painting specifically, one sees a balance between the flat reality of marks on a surface, and the notional impression of physical space (with the notable exception of non representational art, but I'll address this later). These are two separate languages, that completely rely on each other for meaning. However, both require an internal balance in order for the piece to be cohesive. Any successful art work has a careful internal balance of marks that not only work towards creating an illusion, but also work towards a structural harmony that has nothing to do with the notional subject. It is partly because of this intersection of the material fact with the symbolic one that we enjoy the experience of Fine Art.

"in drawings that are universally recognized as masterpieces, there is a vigorous tension between highly developed two dimensional unity, and highly developed 3

dimensional plasticity."<sup>[10]</sup>

In other words, a balance of form and content.

This in fact *is* the process of making art-reconciling the form itself with the depicted subject. The form is a substantiation of a theoretical system of expression. It is the speaking of the language, which communicates the abstract emotive or associative content. To further the metaphor, the process of art is not simply the speaking of a language, it is not merely a pedestrian attempt at communication, (spoken language is just way more efficient for that purpose). It is instead, at its highest level of operation, the creation of the language through speaking it. The content of the work demands of the artist it's own customized form. An artist seeking to express something innate, instead of copying from the idiom, will find a pre-existing explicit system of expression inherently unsatisfactory.

"for drawings to function as communication they must work in accordance to visual principles accepted by parties to the communication (wittgenstein's communication as game with mutually agreed upon rules) with the difference of rules changing as intuited meanings shift, so imagine a chess game where every game changes the rules. "<sup>[10]</sup>

The key here is that the processes have been perfectly harnessed to serve the expression of the subject. The object is therefore the perfect representation of the

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<sup>10</sup> Rawson, Philip. *Drawing: Second Edition*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1969. Print. Chapter 1 the theoretical base

subject/concept. When this is true, art, in any of it's myriad permutations, becomes quite an essential part of human communication. The most effective art works communicate phenomena that no pre-existing language has been able to. Every effective work of art has had to go on and forge or customize a language for it's one specific phenomenal expression.

So far we've been treating technique as something essentially different from content. The history of art is rife with schools of thought arguing for the superiority of content, or of structure, (as with "expressionism" or "constructivism") but from this vantage point, there is no extracting these two elements from each other. Proponents of form for it's own sake, argue that content is simply a shadow of the object itself, and needs no deliberate attention. Proponents of content argue that subject is the heart of artistic objects, without which form cannot possibly have meaning. I think the split between the two is highly exaggerated and misses the point. When one is engaged in process, art essentially becomes a totality where there is no clear borderline border separating the form and content. They are aspects of Visual language, the entirety of which cannot exclude either dimension.

#### dTHE BIG PICTURE

So now we've been provided with a binary analysis of technique, which has really only dealt with two steps, the communicating factor, and that which is

communicated. We brought it together under the banner of process. But there are other factors, which further complicate things. Scott McCloud, a prominent cultural theorist on the art of graphic novels has charted a fairly thorough model of the creative process that breaks down into six steps. <sup>[11]</sup>

1.Idea

2.form

3.Idiom

4.structure

5.craft

6.surface

Idea is defined as the impulse, the concept, emotion, philosophy, or other purpose by which a project is carried out. Form, in this context, refers to art form, or medium, carrier of the message, (not to be confused with form as physical object). Idiom covers cultural context, genres, "schools", stylistic gestures, and the cultural criticism surrounding the work. Structure refers to the arrangement, or composition of the work, the abstract set of instructions that has guided the process, often accomplished in the planning phase of a given project. Craft is the process, "getting the job done", the application of skills, knowledge, and problem-solving in carrying out those instructions. Finally, surface refers to the finished product, it's immediate presence, the first thing we are exposed to when coming into contact with the work.

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<sup>11</sup> McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: HarperCollis, 1993. Print. Chapter7 the 6 steps

We start from the surface, or point of exposure. In artists, this awakens some deep need to express oneself. Only (speaking anecdotally) this is felt more vaguely as a resonance of sorts; a deep desire to partake in the phenomena on a more active level than simply as spectator. Proceeding from here, artists work backwards through craft and structure. This is the realm of technique. I've dedicated so much attention to it because it is so thoroughly ignored, or poorly understood in modern art culture, from the college systems straight through to the galleries and publications. (This reflects my struggle to find information along these lines, of which my thesis project is a reflection.) Craft and structure can only be given meaning through the root levels of creative endeavor, "form" and "idea". Once technique is mastered, once artists have absorbed everything they can in regards to the various permutations, history and theory of their particular medium, (the idiom in which they work,) they find themselves at the core levels of the practice, dealing with the fundamental issues of creative process. Dealing with forms and Ideas. In McCloud's analysis, Masters tend towards fascination with one or the other<sup>[12]</sup>, those who challenge the basic premises of their discipline, and those who harness perfectly the tools available in service of the idea. Masters of form, (such as Picasso, Stravinsky, Titian, Orsen Welles, Berthold Brecht, Virginia Woolf) while often expressing vivid content, leave a legacy of

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<sup>12</sup> McCloud, Scott. Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art. New York: HarperCollis, 1993. Print. P.179

innovation. Masters of Ideas, (Dickens, Rembrandt, Bob Dylan, Kurosawa, Ursula k. Leguin,) who perhaps break formalistic patterns in service of content, all leave a legacy of narratives, vivid impressions, rich worlds and unforgettable characters.

#### ABSTRACT ART

Sometime around 1913 Apollinaire invented the word "Orphism" using it to describe the working methods of one Robert Delaney<sup>[pics-8]</sup>. He defined it as "the art of painting new structures out of elements that have not been borrowed from the visual sphere, but have been created entirely by the artist...it is a pure art."<sup>[13]</sup> This sums up the great ambition and central conceit of non representational Fine Art (and to some extent, Modernist aesthetic principles) during the first half of the 20th century. Here was invention of a "pure" art arrived at by the divorcing of the picture plane from the stifling grip of observable reality. Cute. Interestingly, although Abstraction as a mode unto itself lasted well into the 60s, it's most radical experiments and propositions were done before 1920 (Kandinsky, Malevich, Duchamp, Matisse). It took several decades for the excitement of this idea to wear off, by the 60's the first generation of postmodernists, tired of looking for yet another way of combining

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<sup>13</sup> Harrison and Wood, Art in theory, 1900-2000, Wiley-Blackwell, 2003, p. 189.

graphic elements divorced from any recognizable context, moved along to newer forms. Thankfully, these were less strict on bouncing subject matter out of the art party, but by then everyone was pandering to the Formalists, so elements of subject matter, however tenuous, had to be defended and fought for.<sup>[14]</sup>

Despite the sarcasm, I do have an appreciation for the innovations of the abstract movements. But the dogma with which the movement tried to discredit and deny all works of the past, well, there's certain fascist undertones implied that make one loosen the collar of one's shirt (futurism in fact, was explicitly a fascist aesthetic, but I am referring more generally to Abstract Art's wholesale rejection of the past, as evidenced by most notable artschools burning and smashing their plaster cast collections in the 20s(in Europe)), and again in the 50s(In America))<sup>[15]</sup>. Furthermore, there are some basic flaws with the movement's key reasoning, even from its onset.

Abstract art represents one extreme of the visual language, the one renegade strand within art criticism which claims that Form can swallow up the role of numen or subject. Art for Art's sake, it doesn't have to be about something other than itself, just by being itself. In this respect one can easily defend one's work with McLuhan's "medium is the message" bit, (it worked in high school!) However, this is a poor interpretation of McLuhan's point, or rather, does not take into account

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<sup>14</sup> Prince, Mark. Conceptual Formalism, Encyclopedia Britannica online  
[www.britannica.com/bps/additionalcontent/18/22511616/CONCEPTUAL-FORMALISM](http://www.britannica.com/bps/additionalcontent/18/22511616/CONCEPTUAL-FORMALISM)

<sup>15</sup> Pericles Lewis, *Modernism, Nationalism, and the Novel* (Cambridge University Press, 2000). pp 38-39.

the true linguistic phenomenon that McLuhan was referring to. In our case, the larger truth of a work, which communicates not through it's content, but by very virtue of it's existing as a certain combination of physical properties, and how this is consumed or received by the reader.

#### **b** FAULTY LOGIC

Consider for a moment The term "Abstract". It makes perfect sense in math, logic, Linguistics or computer science, where it refers to something which is wholly removed from the concrete world and therefore belongs to the conceptual realm of "class". For example, while you can point at things which "are blue", by which you mean they have blue attributes, nowhere can you find the object that "blue" is. Blue is, therefore, a class belonging to a subset of the larger class containing the definition for properties known as colour. The usefulness of this concept diminishes when translated into the Fine Art medium, because what gives Fine Art meaning, and I would argue is the basic impetus behind the activity in the first place, is the human analogizing faculty. Artists for a time during high modernism seemed to think that they could borrow the look and basic operational structure of math in order to come up with a graphic vocabulary that was truly removed from any hint of real objects. One that would be universally understood and that was self-relational so as to serve as pure communication, albeit of an emotive form<sup>[16]</sup>. A metalanguage for Art, to reflect the sorts of

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<sup>16</sup> Rawson, Philip. *Drawing: Second Edition*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1969. Print. p.29



unambiguous certainties of math, and so Kandinsky set out to systematically define the language of colour and line in his particular synaesthetic way, while Malevich worked with black and white squares under the banner of "Suprematism". The problem with this is that it could not lead to anything other than visual experiments. No practical communicative value could result because it was a firmly intellectual pursuit having to do with the definition of the fine art medium. There was never any true communicative pursuit. As matter of fact, there was no need for such a pursuit, as it already existed in about as highly an evolved form as visual media could possibly allow, you're looking at it right now in fact.

Letters, and (especially) numbers, written language. A fixed series of non representational graphic icons, relating in very specific ways to convey unambiguous meaning. And yet even here, at the furthest reaches of the non-objective we cannot wipe all traces of object, because written language is rooted in pictographic representation. Written letters evolved out of symbols which were themselves simplified pictorial representations, these were necessarily loaded with meaning precisely because of their associative value. One might say the roots of all written languages are cartoons. In Asia, written language never lost its pictographic form (perhaps it is no coincidence therefore that calligraphy in these cultures is so highly esteemed). In the West, things have rather changed since the Sumerian wheat sheaves and ox heads, however even modern alphabets retain traces of the pictograph. The letter A, for example which at one

point meant ox, is an upside down head, flip it and you can see the stems turn into ox horns <sup>[pics9]</sup>. This is a much longer and more natural evolution into the nonrepresentational than the pithy contrivances of Abstract Art, which in it's wake, has left a poor understanding of the highly significant elements of abstraction that already existed in Fine Art the world over (especially but not exclusively in non-European cultures, whose artworks may have inspired the attempt to begin with).

#### <sup>c</sup>LOW BROW TAKES UP THE CAUSE

Despite what I see as the failure of the various abstract movements, the whole endeavor had an interesting side effect, While the mediums of "High Art" (painting, sculpture, etc.) ended up fixed under the weight of their intellectual rigidity, their radical attempts implicitly gave permission to the "lower" art mediums (illustration, comics, advertising) to explore some of the same formal elements in a far more deliberate, communicative, and ultimately successful way. Let's turn to cartoons for further explanation.

Because Comics and cartoons evolved as mediums for telling stories, (or communicating content) their evolution hinged upon clarity (much like written language itself), and the ability for the surface rendering style to evoke associations sympathetic to those stories. Unlike painting, stylistic dazzle could not exist for it's own sheer aesthetic value, it had to

be sublimated in order for stories to read properly. Cartoons, because of their very nature, ended up rediscovering and thoroughly exploiting the true strength of Abstraction as a communicative agent (this is not a divorce from the realm of objects, as with Abstract Art, but a purposeful distortion based on the nature of those objects, much as the renaissance draughtsmen, but for different reasons). The ability for self identification through generalization. Simply put, the less detail the subject has, the more universal it becomes, the stronger our identification with it. "Amplification through simplification"<sup>[17]</sup>

#### <sup>d</sup>A FUN DEMONSTRATION

Think of a photograph on the one hand, which can only refer to one person. Incrementally, we make a more basic and cartoony rendering of the same face. Reduce the colour and shading to black and white with a few hatched lines for shadows. It now refers not to one individual, but to a certain type of individual (this is the provenance of caricatures). Simplify this even further, and we have a smiley face, a circle, two dots and a curvy line. This refers to almost everyone, the smiley face is the most universal depiction of a face imaginable. Except, if we extend the exercise to further realms of abstraction, one could simply write...

eye

eye

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<sup>17</sup> McCloud, Scott. Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art. New York: HarperCollis, 1993. Print.

mouth

or even simpler...

## FACE

You'd generalize the meaning even further. However, the above diagram doesn't really have the same immediate effect as one of these : ) does it? the word FACE is so entirely notional, it says nothing at all about the subject, just kind of points to the thing without any commentary whatsoever. Even the emoticon smiley face, as general as it is, by the arrangement of both dots and curved line, shows us certain attributes. it's a cute smiley guy. This guy : ) is slightly different from this guy : ) which is not the same at all the same as this guy : ) or this one : [

But none of these nuances can be communicated by "FACE" because the carrier has now lost its intimate knowledge of the message it represents.

<sup>e</sup> HOW COMICS SPEAK WITH ABSTRACTION

Every cartoon and comic character we grew up with as kids shows some interplay between generalization and specificity. The best comic artists always found different ways of incorporating this into their style. While the action comics of North America simplified the whole aesthetic into bold lines, and heroic body types for their figures, European and Japanese cultures began to vary the elements of their styles to communicate different things. For example, both in Manga and European strips there evolved what's known as the Masking effect, where highly realistic backgrounds are played off of simplified main characters. In Herge's Tintin series, this was done with the meticulous, obsessive attention to detail regarding practically anything inhabiting the world, locations are view accurate, vehicles are model specific, buildings, furniture, clothes, all researched and faithfully depicted to the last detail, and yet Tintin is still little more than a smiley face with a swoosh of hair. He needs to be that way for us to identify so strongly with him.

In Japan masking was even further developed as a complicated narrative tool, with Protagonists were simplified into cartoons, while other characters were rendered with more realism, thus communicating to us who we keep a strong emotional link with, and who belongs to the outside world. This can add a sinister ambience to a character that has not yet been revealed as a villain, or it can simply connote unimportant characters. Sometimes the same objects or characters will jump between completely different stylistic treatments ("chibby" style depicts big headed baby types, and even

in fairly detailed adult styles, characters will suddenly jump into chibby selves for several frames while they're conveying emotions.) [\[pics-10\]](#)

While it would be more accurate to say that these developments happened under the influence not of Abstract art, but of those experimental stages that lead to it, such as Expressionism and Cubism, there is no question that the medium could not have grown up in a culture that wasn't guided by Modernism. While sequential art existed as far back as the Bayeaux tapestry, or even the Egyptian hieroglyphics, its evolution also hinges on the simultaneous development of other modern media, namely Photography, Film and Newspapers. I suppose one can look at a Hogarth's prints, or Goya's drawing folios as proto comics by virtue of their word captions and narrative content, but how far a cry this is from what we think of as comics. There had to be an essential shift in the drawing paradigm to allow for a new narrative medium to emerge. How fascinating then, that the same activity can, through the context of it's display, constitute an entirely different medium! Because of the resulting shift in purpose and intuited meanings, comic artists came to understand and communicate with the elements of abstraction in a way that fine art counterparts rarely did , perhaps because it was not required of them.

#### THE STATE OF REALISM

Here's an interesting breakdown of human vision so far as it pertains to the act of seeing in relation to

art. Very briefly, the retina sends information to the visual cortex. This has roughly one million cells. some of these cells have memory pattern recognition, the function of which is to recognize objects out of the chaos of visual information, in other words, groupings with distinct boundaries. Much like the brain learns words from a stream of audio. The whole of the stream of information, cannot possibly be processed, and what is recognized and processed to a large extent has to do with what we need to understand about our environment in order to survive. What this implies is that "to a very large extent we only see what we have learned to know"<sup>[18]</sup>

Lets take a look at what this means for the practice and understanding of fine art.

#### **b** HUMANIST PURSUIT

The classical mode of Realism presumes that Nature is the ultimate teacher, and the artist is best taught by accurately observing its workings. Nature itself is a concrete entity outside of the artist, It is treated by Renaissance artists (and the attitude prevailed for centuries) as the face of god. "from Nature" or "nature is my teacher" is a phrase that was invoked most doggedly by the High renaissance draughtsmen, by Da Vinci, Durer, The Carraci brothers, Alberti, and has passed through the lips of most notable painters and through the pages of virtually every drawing manual

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<sup>18</sup> Michelwright, Keith. *Drawing: Mastering the Language of Visual Expression*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2005. Print. P.7

right up until the 20th century. The classical approach (referring in general to the period of art from the 15th century until around the turn of the end of the 19th century) claims to reveal truth by way careful observation, whereby stylistic interpretation is simply a byproduct of elegant execution. Although this is stated often and with much enthusiasm, especially in the 16th and 17th centuries, it's not quite true in the strictest sense.<sup>[19]</sup>

Artists began making more and more observational studies as soon as paper became more widely available with the flourishing of the paper mill industry at the end of the 15th century. However only the workshop masters got to use the precious commodity of paper so freely, it still being a rather expensive commodity. From a business standpoint, studies from nature did little in the way of income, and was a more time intensive way of solving compositional issues than a simple under drawing on the surface of the final painted work, on the other hand, it allowed for exploration with intricate compositions and unconventional poses. As the 15th century gave way to the 16th, resulting numerous aesthetic breakthroughs lead to a new level of respect for naturalism in draughtsmanship, and all artists sought to learn from famous cartoons of the masters the secrets of foreshortening, gestural anatomy, and chiaroscuro. The masters had already gone through a full apprenticeship by then, the course of which had them mechanically copying out of workshop drawing books, and learning the techniques common to workshops in their

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<sup>19</sup> Ames-Lewis, Francis. *Drawing in Early Renaissance Italy: Second Edition*. New Haven, London: Yale UP, 2000. Print. P.19



region, they had over a period of several years absorbed the various gestures and visual vocabulary of their masters, and so, had a well trained system of graphic expression at hand when they began to "copy" from life. Furthermore, this was not so direct a copy as a superficial reading of texts would imply. Even allowing for the subconscious styling of the workshop training, there were deliberate reasons to distort the drawn subject from that which was being drawn.

Studies from life followed certain philosophical and aesthetic principles that broke away from a literal system of copying. The humanist aspirations of the High Renaissance artists had them inquiring into the nature of what was observed, a way of dignifying the craft of drawing so that it would be elevated to the same coveted status as philosophy. It was thought that studying nature lead you to the underlying beauty and symmetry of creation, the underlying cause. This was one reason that DaVinci (a terrible mathematician himself) was so interested in geometry, (and wrote "let no man who is not a mathematician read the elements of my works")<sup>[20]</sup> the implications behind the golden mean were perfectly in tune with the enlightened pursuit. So the sketches and studies of the period leaned towards illuminating the implicit laws manifested in natural phenomena, more than capturing the specificity of the objects being studied. Beauty Truth and Nature were causally connected, and the delicate nature of old drawing styles reflects this.

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<sup>20</sup> Davinci, Leonardo. The Notebooks of Leonardo Davinci, vol 1. (these have been published in an endless variety of books but can be found at the following website as a free public domain book: <http://italian.classic-literature.co.uk/leonardo-da-vinci/>)

Later generations did away with such a charming view, and Baroque art shows much more of a specificity in the figure, and a willingness, at times eagerness to explore the flaws and idiosyncrasies of specific models. Certain of these specificities, signs of decay in particular, became quite fashionable as the mood of European culture veered towards the severe tones brought on by Puritanism. However, even so, this later art still adhered to aesthetic principles of harmony as laid out by the earlier, humanist generations. They had simply adapted the humanist mode to reflect their changed culture, which called for a heightened realism, differentiated figure types, an honest and flawed physicality which the idealist works of the Renaissance lacked. There is a controversial theory posited by David Hockney<sup>[21]</sup> (I find it very credible, as do many notable art historians) delineating the use of drawing machines and various projection devices in the artist's workshop as far back as the 15th century. Assuming there is truth to this claim (consider that artists and lens makers belonged to the same craft guilds, as well, most notable classical paintings and drawings depict left handed figures, which would be accounted for by the inversion effect caused by projection) it implies that by the baroque era, there were established tools widely used by artists that would help them accurately map out the world as they perceived it. It is important to note that the classical psyche would never have thought to question the apparent validity of the perceptual mechanism itself.

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<sup>21</sup> Hockney, David. *Secret Knowledge: Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of the Old Masters*. London: Studio P, 1999. Print

## <sup>c</sup>A POSTMODERN CONUNDRUM

All of the classical aesthetic and philosophical assumptions were done away with by the onset of Modernism in general. Postwar culture was driven to reject the old creed where beauty is truth, and reacted by seeking beauty in the unconventional or even the outwardly repulsive. In our own postmodern era this relatively new understanding of the seeing mechanism adds to this, putting a rather awkward relativist cog in the classical dialogue by exploding the assumption that the sight sense is an impartial mechanical apparatus to begin with. The Renaissance observer could wander around and marvel at God's works, and use the instruments of the senses to study them. The modern observer, cannot trust her own sense instruments to give her an unbiased picture (pardon the pun) of those works, and must rely instead on external instruments to do the observing.

As most brain processing functions that humans regularly engage in, vision is a highly selective phenomena. What we experience as vision is a patchwork image accessing only a narrow bandwidth of the available incoming information. Which brings up a super interesting question, What are we NOT seeing that IS there? What constitutes the rest of that stream of information that the visual cortex chooses not to process? And what kinds of implications might this have for visual art?

Well one example of something we know we're not seeing is Blur. Cameras made us more astutely aware of such things as focus, depth of field, and the phenomena

of motion blur. While the first two mentioned phenomena happen quite commonly in sight, the third does not. If you consider a camera to be essentially a brainless eye, how come when you move a handcam around, you end up creating motion blur, the image doesn't crystallize until the camera settles (as anyone who's seen Blair witch project will attest). There's a simple answer, and a complex one. The simple answer is that the eye never moves as slowly as the hand with the handcam does, it scans extremely quickly, moving the fovea around to pick up details within the whole field of vision, so motion blur would happen for long enough for us to pick up on it. The second reason is the camera is not intelligent, and has no internal reason pick out certain things from the field of vision, and cancel other things out. The information resulting from the saccadic movements of the eye doesn't register in the visual cortex, thus making the whole business of recognizing objects in space a much tidier affair.

This happens in many other ways as well, such as colour interpolation, and colour spectrum bias. Just like the ear can't pick up frequencies below 60 hertz, or above roughly 20,000 hertz (dog whistle frequency), so too the eye isn't sensitive to infra red. We are such visually biased creatures, and yet our sense of sight is entirely biased to our particular human survival strategies. And so we don't have infra red vision, or panoramic vision, and cannot see colour in the dark. As long as people were the crowning achievement of creation, their particular sensory (and indeed all other) biases would have seemed intentional and

purposeful, however the modern era has rejected, at least in the intellectual realm, this (human)centric frame of reference.

Modern modes care far less about the dictation of what's observed, seeking instead to reveal either through radical interpretation of visual information, or through a totally non observational approach that can express an internal truth. This culminates in non representational art, which finally severs perception from the process. The old yardstick of nature, is nothing, and so too is any fixed notion of technique. There actually is no yardstick (if ever there was), and at the risk of sounding cynical, the measure of good art in the twenty first century has more to do with the opinion of a select few art world kingmakers. Not to disparage conceptual art modes, but simply put, such work is impenetrable to the uninitiated.

Cubism was the first movement to explicitly call into question the rules of the picture plane as established by the classic mode, (perspective and the behaviour of light for example) and by extension our understanding of seeing via graphic expression. However it never extended much beyond being an aesthetic exercise, and ran its course within a few years. Only recently, beginning with Hockney's Polaroid collage series was this line of inquiry seriously addressed again.

<sup>d</sup>END PART

For me this is one issue worth exploring through an observation based art practice. If one move beyond observation based picture making, they've lost the necessary visual and cultural reference points to play off of. However within the formidable limitations of realistic art, how can one start to deconstruct the seamlessness of seeing? how does one call into question the illusion of timelessness in a picture? These sorts of questions hold interest for me because they provide opportunities to bridge old world methods into the contemporary life. This is a difficult proposition precisely because the old techniques are so inherently interconnected with the classical psyche, with it's cozy humanist bearings, while contemporary life is so fraught with moral and spiritual ambiguities, fractured perspectives, and a lack of coherent narrative that would have terrified the likes of Petrarch. A vast majority of contemporary artists thinking along realist lines have utterly failed to create work that resonates with the modern public because they have not addressed this issue at a fundamental level. They have instead sought to populate their pictures with contemporary subjects. But the contrivance is obvious, and results in work that is too self conscious, in which craft and structure are at odds with content. I fear Realism in art has no future unless it is capable of addressing the contemporary psyche. But in order to do so, it will have to re examine its presumptions about what it is to see, just as scientists and philosophers have done.

#### ADDENDUM

Part 1 of this paper was based on several journal entries I kept during the painting process. It reflects my views at the time of the work. However, upon rewriting and reviewing these sentiments, I find myself often disagreeing with these views or finding their logic rather flimsy. This is actually a great thing, because much of the opinions herein constitute my world view in regards to Art. I couldn't really examine these views objectively while they were racing through my mind, but having given voice to them here, I can see the see them for the opinions that they are. A contrast to the realities that I felt them to be.

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